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ABSTRACT

Issues concerning whether to centralize or decentralize decision-making are addressed, with applications for colleges. Centralization/decentralization (C/D) must be analyzed with reference to a particular decision. Three components of C/D are locus of authority, breadth of participation, and relative contribution by the decision-maker's staff. C/D analysis can also shift depending on the identities of individuals at the core or outer circle. Strategic, tactical, and operational decisions are distinguished. Empirical findings from the literature on C/D suggest that: strategic decisions are best made by centralized authority with decentralized participation; and the authority to make operational decisions should be decentralized as much as possible. Tactical and operational decisions that relate to established strategy are probably made at lower levels of authority and with less participation, except when they generate a fair amount of controversy. Five questions should be used to determine whether centralization or decentralization is appropriate: (1) is it a strategic decision? (2) what is the organizational context of the decision? (3) who should have the authority to make the decision? (4) should participation be broad or narrow? and (5) to what extent would the decision-maker's staff be involved? (SW)

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ON DECIDING HOW TO DECIDE:
To Centralize or Decentralize

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> Because authority and responsibility are dispersed and relate predominantly to a trust, the ground of the institution's existence lies as much in consensus about the way decisions get made as it does in the decisions themselves.
>
> (Bacchetti 1977, p. 4)

Pressures to decentralize a decision process often are exerted--usually by those who feel excluded from the decision--in both business and higher-education organizations. The pressures can be powerful, in part because decentralization is the widely preferred mode of decisionmaking. In business, rising interest in the question is evidenced by a number of articles and books on Theory Z, the Japanese management style in which decisions are made only by consensus among all affected parties. In higher education, interest in decentralization is evidenced primarily in scattered incidents--for example, in charges that the decision to abolish an academic department is not legitimate because faculty in that department were not fully consulted beforehand. In other words, higher-education administrators occasionally are asked to decentralize a particular decision, or they receive complaints about centralization of a decision already made.

Administrators in that position may deny the charges, pointing to extensive deliberation and consultation before the decision was made. Or they may point out that centralization is necessary to ensure that decisions are consistent in directing the organization toward its goals.

In recent years, centralization has been an issue in several developments at colleges and universities. The number and contributions of various kinds of administrative specialists in central offices, such as planners, development officers, government liaison personnel, grants officers, recruiters, and

financial analysts has steadily increased. Adoption of a variety of management process tools, such as PPBS, zero-base budgeting, and strategic planning, tends to route to central officers information that was previously dispersed throughout the organization. With widespread adoption of collective bargaining during the past 15 years, the decentralized units (faculty and staff) have, in principle, gained a voice in decisionmaking through unionization. But in fact, collective bargaining can create a bipolar, centralized process.

A great deal has been written on the centralization/decentralization (C/D) issue, most of it either empirical or hortative. An exception is an excellent review of the issue provided in chapter 9 of Mortimer and McConnell (1978). The views expressed there are largely compatible with those presented here, but Mortimer and McConnell stop short of providing clear direction for the decisionmaker. The administrator who wishes to deal with C/D as a practical matter must search widely and read much in order to sense what the research suggests and how to deal with the issue when it arises on the campus.

The purpose here is to suggest an analytic procedure for the administrator who is interested in evaluating and perhaps changing the C/D of one or more decisions in a higher-education institution--a procedure that incorporates available research results. The procedure assumes that both centralization and decentralization have appropriate roles in an organization--that neither is inherently superior to the other. The administrator's challenge is to decide when to invoke one or the other, and how.

What are Centralization and Decentralization?

Before defining centralization and decentralization, it is important to establish the common referent: the process by which decisions are made. People

in higher-education institutions must make a multitude of decisions--whether a new major will be offered or an existing one deleted, what kind of person should be sought to fill a faculty vacancy, how to allocate the operating budget, and whether to encourage adult enrollments. In a professionalized organization, expectations of expertise and norms of collegiality create a tendency to leave certain important decisions in the hands of the experts--wherever they may be in the organization. There is no compelling prima facie reason why all decisions ought to be equally centralized or decentralized. In higher-education institutions, therefore, the appropriate unit of analysis is the decision, not the organization. Once made, this point may seem self-evident. However, it should be kept in mind when someone complains that a college is too centralized, or that a university's identity and ability to control its destiny are becoming fragmented by decentralization. Such remarks tend to mislead the administrator bent on analyzing C/D issues to look at the institution, rather than at decisions or sets of decisions.

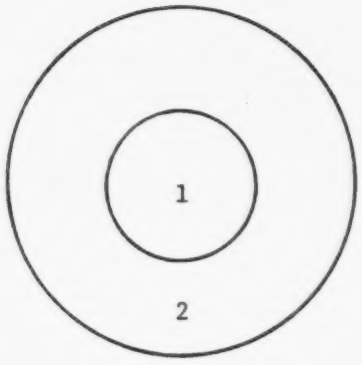
Centralization and decentralization are generally thought to designate the opposite ends of a continuum that ranges from one person at or near the top of the hierarchy making the decision (centralization) to decision authority delegated to someone who is as low in the hierarchy as possible (decentralization). This is the classic, formal definition of the ends of the C/D continuum, but there are others. Often, demands for decentralization are really demands for broader participation in the decisionmaking process. This perspective, in which C/D ranges from limited or no participation to widespread involvement and consultation, is the one most often taken in empirical research. A third concept arises from a few empirical studies and is of potential interest to administrators because it is readily manipulable in most organizations. In this view, centralization

involves a relatively high number of executive staff by comparison with participants outside the decisionmaker's office, while in decentralization the reverse is true. The decisionmaker's staff presumably includes various functional specialists and analysts who provide information that increases the relative power of the decisionmaker, because of the impact of the staff expertise involved and the amount of staff time devoted to the decision. By contrast, other participants usually are limited by the time and energy they can divert from assigned tasks, making it more difficult for them to produce information that will compete successfully with that developed by the decisionmaker's staff.

Administrators can use any one or any combination of those three operational decision modes to shift a decision process. Therefore one need not give away the authority to make a decision or insist on nominal position authority (as the classic definition suggests) in order to change the C/D of a decision process. There are other options, more subtle and in some cases less disruptive.

For example, to decentralize the allocation of operating budget funds, one might broaden the participation of individuals outside central administration, either by soliciting more input from department heads regarding their own areas or by adding a faculty task force on the budget. If participation by members of the decisionmaker's staff remains constant, this action will simultaneously decentralize the decision process on the third operational definition, the relative participation of executive staff. Broadening participation in this way does not require changing the allocation of authority. But when done in good faith, it can shift the process toward decentralization.

C/D can be viewed in various contexts, depending on where a decision fits in the organization (figure 1). The core area can be defined in most cases as



KEY: Each area can be interpreted in several ways, depending on the decision. For example,

A. 1 = president/top executives
   2 = everyone else

B. 1 = governing board/legislature
   2 = everyone else

C. 1 = central administration
   2 = lower administrative officers
   or
   2 = faculty

D. 1 = dean/faculty governing body
   2 = other faculty

E. 1 = faculty
   2 = everyone else

Fig. 1. Some Contexts for Centralization/Decentralization

the locus of authority for the decision in question, although in some cases it may be more useful to define it as the set of individuals who typically participate most in the decision. The outer area contains those who are directly or indirectly affected by the decision. To the extent that they participate in the decision, the boundary between the two areas becomes blurred.

Note that the figure uses concentric circles, rather than the more common hierarchical pyramid, to represent decisionmaking contexts. Furthermore, the faculty, who might be considered by some to stand lower in the hierarchy than top administrators, are defined in the last context example as the occupants of the core area. These two departures from what is typical in a more bureaucratic organization do not at all surprise the reader familiar with higher-education organizations.

Three features of C/D have been identified thus far. First, C/D must be analyzed with reference to a particular decision. Second, it has three distinct

aspects--locus of authority, breadth of participation, and relative contribution by the decisionmaker's staff. Finally, the organizational context of C/D analysis can shift, depending on the identities of individuals who are either at the core or in the outer circle (figure 1) with respect to the decision in question. One final piéce of conceptual background will prove useful in understanding the analytic procedure described in the next section of this paper.

All three of the C/D features discussed above are highly decision-dependent. Many ways of categorizing decisions are potentially useful. The one that seems most relevant for C/D discussions categorizes decisions as strategic, tactical, or operational. Although the most important distinction for our purposes is between strategic and all other decisions, each of the three kinds will be briefly defined and illustrated.

Strategic decisions (a) guide the organization in its relationship to its environment, (b) affect the internal structure and process of the organization, and (c) substantially affect the organization's performance (Hambrick 1980, p. 567). These decisions establish the major parameters for organizational effort and generally answer the question: "What are we doing or going to do?" Tactical decisions are one step lower in generality. They derive from strategic decisions and help answer the question: "How are we going to do it?" Through tactical decisions, activities are integrated and priorities are established. Operational decisions are still more narrow and specific. They establish procedures for conducting the daily business of the organization. Because they are narrow in scope and limited in effect, most operational decisions, whether taken singly or in small groups, cannot affect the organization's overall performance or its position in the environment. In principle, they operationalize the tactical and strategic decisions, answering the question: "Who will do what?"

Distinguishing between tactical and operational decisions is primarily a matter of judgment and context--what is tactical in one case may be operational in another. That difference is not central to the argument of this paper. The distinction between those two kinds of decisions and strategic decisions is important here. Reviewing the sample decision issues in table 1 will help clarify the differences between strategic, tactical, and operational decisions.

Both the descriptive and research literature are specific and consistent about how strategic decisions are most successfully made. Drucker, for example, calls for centralized control over decisions about what technologies, markets, and products to go into; what businesses to start or terminate; the basic values, beliefs, and principles of a company; the allocation of capital; and the allocation of key personnel (1974, p. 578). In the management literature, as well as in the minds of most executives, these kinds of strategic decisions are in fact top management's reason for being (although an interesting counterpoint discussion is provided in Landau and Stout 1979, pp. 150-151). Despite the important differences between business firms and colleges, there is no apparent reason why the level of authority for making strategic decisions should differ.

Table 1
Illustrations of Strategic, Tactical, and Operational Decisions

Type of Decision \ Decision Sets	A	B	C	D
Strategic	Shall we initiate a summer session?	Shall central purchasing be required?	Shall we create a school of business?	Shall we freeze tenure opportunities?
Tactical	Must all departments offer courses?	Is equipment to be included?	Will it offer grad and undergrad courses?	Will any departments be exempt?
Operational	Which courses will department X offer?	Will it apply to orders for less than $500?	Will it accept parttime students?	Who will monitor the vital signs to alert us when the freeze goal is accomplished?

Regarding breadth of participation, however, theoretical discussions and research studies suggest that decentralization of strategic decisions is in order. This is the area in which most C/D researchers have worked. A synthesis of the major findings of those studies (which are listed in the Appendix) is presented in table 2. The table shows that the commonly expressed preference for decentralization has some empirical ground--it tends to be associated with such important outcomes as high morale, high productivity, and good financial condition. Several studies have found that these desirable outcomes occur in organizations that use broad participation to make strategic decisions.

In short, the literature suggests that strategic decisions are best made by centralized authority with decentralized participation. The optimal extent of participation by the decisionmaker's staff has not been studied. It probably depends on such factors as the extent to which analysis can provide valuable information for the decision in question.

Table 2

Summary of Empirical Findings on Centralization/Decentralization

	Centralization	Decentralization
Where is it likely to occur?	level of authority for strategic decisions in large professionalized organizations; smaller organizations	participation in strategic decisions; tactical and operating decisions in large professionalized organizations; perhaps more often when the environment is uncertain
What are its advantages?	(not studied)	high morale; high productivity; good financial condition
What are its correlates?	communication, if the proportion of administrators is high	communication (may be an artifact of defining C/D in terms of participation rate)

There is virtual consensus that the authority to make operational decisions should be decentralized as much as possible. The literature says little about the authority to make tactical decisions or about participation in either tactical or operational decisions. There may be considerable variation in these areas, depending on the specific decision. For example, when a new strategic decision is made, central authorities may also specify the major tactical and operational decisions that will be required to carry it out. In this way, they can think through and communicate the implications of the new strategy, both for themselves and for others affected by it. Tactical and operational decisions that relate to established strategy are probably made at lower levels of authority and with less participation, except when they generate a fair amount of controversy. In that case, participation is apt to broaden, either because the decisionmaker wants to know how the decision will be received or because those who will be affected by it speak up in the hope of influencing the decision.

A Procedure for Analyzing Appropriate C/D

How should the administrator structure a decision in which C/D is an issue? Suppose the institution must for the first time make drastic budget cuts. How should we decide how to distribute the reductions? Alternatively, the administrator may face pressures for more participation in a recurrent decision or for a change in the organizational level at which authority to make the decision resides. The following procedure is intended to help the administrator think through some of the ramificiations of deciding how to decide.

The first step must be to identify, as precisely as possible, the decision area at issue. In the process, it may become apparent that the decision area contains several components. In budget reduction, say, one component may be salary reductions, another may be staff reductions, and a third may be

nonpersonnel reductions. If there is reason to believe that the components should be decided in different ways, they should be regarded as separate decisions. In other cases, a decision area may include a sequence of decisions--perhaps before budget reductions are distributed, a decision to resist an imposed reduction or to seek alternative sources of revenue is in order. Whether concurrent or sequential, sets of related decisions can be structured so that they take one another into account. However, they should be recognized as separate decisions that may involve different decision processes. The following discussion assumes that a single decision has been identified for analysis of the extent to which it should be centralized or decentralized.

Step 1: Is it a strategic decision? A strategic decision can be identified by asking the three questions listed earlier: Does the decision involve the relationship of the organization with its environment? Are the internal structure and process of the organization likely to be affected by the outcome of the decision? Is the decision likely to affect the organization's overall performance? The authority to make a strategic decision should be vested centrally, according to most commentators. Authority for operational decisions, those that are narrow in scope and limited in effect, should be delegated to the level where they are to be implemented. Between these two kinds of decisions lie tactical decisions, in which assignment of the level of authority is discretionary.

Breadth of participation in strategic decisions should probably be decentralized. Involving many and diverse participants helps to ensure that useful information will be contributed to the decision--information both about relevant facts regarding the environment and about the nature and magnitude of support or resistance for a potential course of action. The scope of participation in nonstrategic decisions, like the level of authority for

tactical decisions, is discretionary. Factors to be considered in making those judgments, as well as those that pertain to the use of staff to the decisionmaker, will be discussed later.

Step 2: What is the organizational context of the decision? This question recalls the concentric circles of figure 1. If the decision is new, rather than recurrent, the following discussion should be interpreted in light of the expectations that people in the organization are likely to have for how it should be decided.

The individuals in the inner circle of figure 1 can be identified as those who typically had authority to make the decision and others on whom the authority figure has relied in developing it. This will be a relatively short list, in most cases, compared with the list of those in the outer circle who have some vested interest in the outcome of the decision.

As one views these lists, perhaps the most pertinent questions to ask are (a) whether any of the actors have expectations about how the decision should be made that are important either to them or the organization, and (b) whether the actors who can make critical contributions to the decision are included in the inner circle. Relevant expectations might include collegiality, the primacy of either professional expertise or experience in making this decision wisely, and fostering trust among those who have diverse perspectives on the decision. Contributions might include information; willingness to implement the outcome of the decision; and certain personal characteristics such as reasoning skills, conciliatory skills, and imagination.

Considering the current (or expected) configuration of actors in the core and outer circle in light of questions such as these will help determine whether some actors should be shifted from one circle to the other and whether

the boundary between the two circles should be more or less permeable. If the actors in the outer circle have little to contribute, for example, then there is little need to encourage broad participation.

If the administrator feels pressure to change a decision process, the source of the pressure should be carefully considered at this stage. Is the source already in one of the two circles? If the source is in the outer circle, is the pressure intended to get it into the inner circle? Or it is intended to open the boundary between the two circles to achieve more participation and communication? If the source is not in either circle, on what grounds is the pressure based? If the grounds are legitimate, a change in the process may be in order.

When the decision has been identified and classified, and when the key actors have been listed, the administrator has a useful context in which to consider the three elements of C/D: locus of authority, breadth of participation, and extent of staff involvement in making the decision.

Step 3: Who should have the authority to make the decision? Beyond the earlier comments about centralized strategic authority and decentralized operational authority, two major factors shape the best answer to this question: expertise or information, and personal skills of the decisionmaker. Optimally, one individual or decisionmaking body (such as a faculty senate or an admissions committee) will incorporate both of these factors. In some cases, however, a choice must be made as to which factor is more important.

Authority should rest with the individual(s) having relevant expertise or access to information needed for a sound decision--especially when facts and analysis are required to assess alternative courses of action. Expertise may be based on professional training or on experience. Also important, and

paramount when the decision involves diverse values or goals, are such personal skills as listening, conciliation, communication, and trust-building. It is entirely conceivable that a decision may be best left in the hands of the person who has these skills but no relevant expertise, rather than assigning it to an expert on the substance of the decision who has few process skills.

A third factor must be considered. Some decisions, particularly strategic decisions, must be coordinated with other decisions--some of which may not even have been made yet. When this is the case, authority should be assigned to those who either are also responsible for the related decisions or have close working relationships with those responsible for them.

In deciding where to place decision authority, one should also be aware that obtaining that authority can be a goal for those with an appetite for power. An extended discussion of power and politics in organizational decisionmaking is available in Pfeffer (1981).

Several costs may be incurred when authority for a decision is placed in the wrong hands. Among them are inefficient use of personnel, problems with implementing the decision, loss of access to information needed for a sound decision, and undesired furtherance of a special interest. Some of these costs can be offset, however, by judicious use of the other two dimensions of C/D.

Step 4: Should participation be broad or narrow? Participation in decisionmaking should be high when widespread commitment is necessary in order to implement the decision, when views of important parties are diverse or conflicting, when relevant information is dispersed through the organization, and when organizational norms for participation are involved. Only wisdom can determine whether it will be productive or destructive to bring conflict out

in the open through broad participation. But the former is more likely than many administrators realize. Conflict is often uncomfortable and always time-consuming. Bringing it into the open can clarify issues, generate creative solutions, and promote commitment to the decision and to the organization. Conflict should not be encouraged through broad participation when the parties are likely to use it for hidden agendas, when the decision is virtually predetermined for some reason (which is not decisionmaking, as the term is used in this paper), or when a decision must be made within very tight time constraints. Beyond those circumstances, the prospect of bringing out latent conflict should not be the sole reason for limiting participation in decisionmaking.

Among individuals or groups who should be involved in broad participation are those likely to be affected by the decision, those who will carry it out, experts in the decision area, and opinion leaders. The benefits of participation include commitment to the decision and widespread awareness and understanding of the issues and how they were decided. No evidence exists to suggest that broad participation produces better decisions, but for some decisions that is a real possibility. The costs of broad participation include time and effort, as well as some residue of ill will that may remain when a high level of conflict is involved.

Participation should be most limited when the decision is urgent, when it is unimportant, when the grounds upon which the decision should be made depend wholly on specialized expertise, or when the decisionmaker does not intend to pay serious attention to the contributions of the participants. The costs of limited participation include possible loss of information and, if organizational norms or the expectations of key people have been miscalculated, feelings of resentment that the decision was closed.

Step 5: To what extent should the decisionmaker's staff be involved? The contribution of decisionmaker staff to the decision should be high, relative to other participants, when they have the expertise or information needed for a good decision, when the effects of the decision will be felt primarily by the decisionmaker's staff, or when the decisionmaker wishes to assert control over the decision. Such control may be desirable when the decision must be coordinated with other decisions. The benefits of high staff participation, then, include information, expertise, and control. The costs involve staff time and effort and possible resentment among those who feel excluded from the decision.

Involvement by the decisionmaker's staff should be relatively low when the decision has widespread implications and a wide spectrum of information is needed. When staff members have real contributions to make but a decentralized process is desired, the ratio of their participation can be kept low by increasing the participation of others.

Keeping staff involvement low frees staff time to work on other projects or decisions. On the other hand, it can result in some loss of control for the decisionmaker over the decision and its outcome and, if staff contributions are underestimated, in loss of useful information for the decision.

Conclusion. The comment from Bacchetti with which we began emphasizes the importance of consensus on decision process in higher-education institutions. Credibility for a decision can be enhanced when those affected by it can believe in the process by which it was reached. Conversely, decisions can be difficult to accept when the process does not seem to ensure an appropriate simultaneous match of information, expertise, values, and concern for the people who must live with it. Great progress toward such a match comes from careful attention to the level of authority to which the

decision is assigned, the kind of participation it requires, and the involvement of specialized staff members.

Those who decide how an organization will make a decision gain from disciplined analysis of the sort suggested above. They subject their intuitive predilections to reasoned scrutiny, which provides both the opportunity to confirm or to expose inadequacies in their own judgment and the chance to identify creative new approaches that had not occurred to them as they formed preliminary opinions. The cumulative effect of analyzing a number of decision processes is development of consistency in decisionmaking practices throughout the institution. Consistency brings a sense of stability and sensibility to others in the institution--they know what to expect, and they understand why. Decisions, whether they deal with substantive areas or with the decision process itself, are less likely to seem arbitrary. In that context, even the most difficult decisions become more tractable and more acceptable.

APPENDIX

Most of the studies listed here dealt with business organizations, rather than service or professional organizations. Direct transfer of results from the former to the latter is not automatic, because businesses tend to have clearer tasks, more easily measured outputs, simpler goals, and less expectation of shared responsibility for decisionmaking. In business settings, it is relatively easy to hold individuals responsible for the decisions over which they have authority, the range of diverse views regarding a decision is likely to be narrower, and one decision may be more cleanly separated from another.

Furthermore, since almost all of the studies are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, their findings admit no inference of causal relations. We do not know, for example, whether decentralization causes increased communication or high morale, whether a high rate of communication and good morale cause decentralization, or whether these factors simply tend to coincide in organizations, as joint effects of unknown causes.

Most of the studies use breadth of participation as their measure of C/D; some add the level of authority, and a few use the ratio of decisionmaker staff to other participants. Most of them focus on strategic decisions, although often without explicitly identifying them as such. Researchers collectively have shown a bias for decentralization over centralization. None has yet set out hypotheses regarding the expected beneficial outcomes of centralization, although several have looked for and found such outcomes of decentralization. We do not know whether any other kinds of beneficial outcomes are available in centralization--such as goal achievement or efficiency.

Reading List of Empirical Studies

C/D and Organizational Condition (morale, productivity, financial health):

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